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From: Carey, Curtis
Sent: Wed 8/26/2015 5:55:00 PM
Subject: Initial News Clips from HQ EPA press event

First Stories from AP and Denver Post.

Associated Press

Investigation: EPA, State Underestimated Spill Potential

BILLINGS, Mont. — Aug 26, 2015, 1:17 PM ET

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

An internal government investigation has found that federal and state regulators underestimated the potential for a blowout from a Colorado mine, documents released Wednesday show.

Investigators concluded the federal Environmental Protection Agency and state regulators underestimated how much water pressure had built up inside the inactive mine before a government cleanup crew triggered the release, according to the documents released by the EPA.

The agency previously offered only impartial information on events leading to the spill.

The Aug. 5 spill involved 3 million gallons of waste from the idled Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colorado, unleashing a torrent of toxic water that fouled rivers in three states.

The Associated Press reported Saturday that EPA managers knew that a large spill was a possibility yet had drafted only a cursory response plan for responding to a spill.

Elected officials have been critical of the EPA's response. Among the unanswered questions is why it took the agency nearly a day to inform downstream communities that rely on the rivers for drinking water. The agency's internal investigation did not address that issue.

The wastewater flowed into a tributary of the Animas and San Juan rivers, turning them a sickly yellow-orange color and tainting them with lead, arsenic, thallium and other heavy metals that can cause health problems and harm aquatic life.

The toxic plume traveled roughly 300 miles through Colorado, New Mexico and Utah, to Lake Powell on the Arizona-Utah border.

EPA water testing has shown contamination levels returning to pre-spill levels, though experts warn some of the contaminants likely sunk and mixed with bottom sediments and could someday be stirred back up.

Toxic water continues to flow out of the mine. Since the accident, the EPA has built a series of ponds so contaminated sediments can settle out before the water enters a nearby creek.

The agency said more needs to be done and the potential remains for another blowout.

Separate investigations into the accident are being conducted by the EPA's Inspector General's Office and the U.S. Department of Interior.

Denver Post

EPA: Underestimated water pressure led to Colorado mine spill

Agency says Gold King Mine adit was apparently not checked for water volume

By Jesse Paul

The Denver Post

The most significant factor leading to the massive Gold King Mine contaminant spill above Silverton this month was an underestimation of water pressure built up in its workings, according to an Environmental Protection Agency internal review released Wednesday.

Further, had crews drilled a hole into the mine's collapsed opening, they "may have been able to discover the pressurized conditions that turned out to cause the blowout."

"It is not evident that the potential volume of water stored within the (mine's opening) had been estimated," the review said. "Given the maps and information known about this mine, a worst-case scenario estimate could have been calculated and used for planning purposes."

The EPA triggered the 3 million-gallon wastewater release on Aug. 5. The spill send yellow-orange sludge cascading through three states and American Indian tribes, leading to emergency declarations and widespread worry.

According to the review, crews at the scene leading up to the release believed since water was leaking from the mine, a buildup of pressure behind its blocked opening was "less likely." Further, the review says, crews thought seep levels above the mine's opening indicated it was

only partially filled and not pressurized.

"The mine was draining, which indicated the buildup of pressure was not likely," Mathy Stanislaus, EPA assistant administrator in the office of solid waste and emergency response, said Wednesday.

The inability to obtain an actual measurement of the mine water pressure behind the mine's blocked issue "seems to be a primary issue," according to the review. It went on to say if the pressure information was obtained, other steps could have been considered.

"Despite the available information suggesting low water pressure behind the debris at the adit entrance, there was, in fact, sufficiently high pressure to cause the blowout," the review says. "Because the pressure of the water in the adit was higher than anticipated, the precautions that were part of the work plan turned out to be insufficient."

The report says contaminated water flowed from the mine at a peak rate that lasted roughly an hour.

The review, summarized in an 11-page report, includes a list of recommendations for further EPA mine work throughout the country.

The review was led by five EPA personnel from multiple EPA regions and headquarters, the agency says, and those involved were tasked with developing a detailed, chronological description of events as well as identifying potential factors contributing to the release.

Officials plan to discuss the findings in an 11 a.m. media call.

The Department of the Interior is conducting an external review of the spill, and it is expected to be released in October. The Congressional Science, Space, and Technology Committee is also investigating the spill.

"EPA will implement all the recommendations from the report and has shared its findings with external reviewers," the agency said in a news release.

This is a developing story that will be updated as more information becomes available.

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